



July 21, 2004

OKLAHOMA BULLETIN NO. OK300-4-18**SUBJECT: LTP – Grassland Reserve Program Information for Fiscal Year 2004**

Purpose: To provide field offices with the information necessary to communicate the availability of and policy for operating the Grassland Reserve Program in fiscal year 2004.

Expiration Date: September 30, 2004

Action Required By August 9, 2004

Secretary Veneman announced the publication of the interim final rule with a 60-day comment period for the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) May 11, 2004. With publication of the interim final rule on May 21, 2004, NRCS and FSA were authorized to initiate activity to obligate the \$2.3 million dollars in GRP funding received this year. Much of the policy, beyond that defined in the rule, remains in draft form. However, the nature of the program requires initiation of the application evaluation process immediately to meet the obligation and reporting requirements established at the national level.

Key changes to the program for this year as identified in the interim final rule include:

- Applications will be accepted on a continuous basis with evaluation and ranking periods advertised through media and state websites.
- States' ranking criteria will consider multiple types of threats to conversion, including: cropping; invasive species; urban development; including home parcels that fragment grasslands; and other activities that threaten grassland resources and grazing operations.
- States are provided the flexibility to weight the threats to conversion within the broad national guidelines.
- Evaluate and provide consideration for enrollment that will provide protection and enhancement of habitat for species with declining populations.
- Flexibility to minimize the enrollment of high cost projects by considering cost effectiveness in the ranking criteria.

Application Evaluation Pools. For Oklahoma, all applications will be evaluated using the same application evaluation criteria. However, applications will be divided into four separate pools for ranking to provide the opportunity to select and fund the applications best serving the objectives of the program. Applicants can offer land under only one enrollment option. There is no specified funding level for each pool and no order of preference granted at this time. These ranking pools are as follows:

Pool 1 Applications for 30 year and permanent easements where the majority of the offered land resides in Canadian, Carter, Comanche, Craig, Creek, Garfield, Grady, Kingfisher, Lincoln, Logan, McClain, Osage, Muskogee, Nowata, Pottawatomie, Okmulgee, Wagoner, and Washington counties.

Pool 2 Applications for 10, 15, 20 and 30 year rental agreements where the majority of the offered land resides in Canadian, Carter, Comanche, Craig, Creek, Garfield, Grady, Kingfisher,

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Lincoln, Logan, McClain, Osage, Muskogee, Nowata, Pottawatomie, Okmulgee, Wagoner, and Washington counties.

Pool 3 Applications for 30 year and permanent easements where the majority of the offered land resides in counties not listed in Pool 1.

Pool 4 Applications for 10, 15, 20 and 30 year rental agreements where the majority of the offered land resides in counties not listed in Pool 2.

Implementation Schedule. The implementation schedule is as follows:

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| • Provide press releases for the Grassland Reserve Program with application acceptance on a continuous basis | Immediately |
| • Application evaluation cut-off date for this fiscal year | August 9, 2004 |
| • Finalize ranking of all applications and email report to NRCS State Office | August 20, 2004 |
| • Select and Notify Applicants and Field Offices | August 25, 2004 |
| • Obligate Allocation in Contracts or Easements | September 30, 2004 |

Deferred Applications. All deferred applications from prior years will have to be re-evaluated using the current revised evaluation criteria. District Conservationists will need to contact applicants to determine their desires and review their evaluations prior to entering on the attached ranking spreadsheet. All 2003 and 2004 applications must be included on the ranking list prior to submitting to the state office.

The following enclosures are provided for use in program implementation this fiscal year:

- ☐ **Interim Final Rule with Request for Comments (7 CFR Part 1415).** Published in the Federal Register on May 21, 2004, this provides the public notification of the interim final rule and established a 60-day comment period closing on July 20, 2004. It includes the definitions, requirements, options, application process, priorities, and payment information. This will serve as the operational guidance for the program until the final rule and program manual are issued. In contrast to a proposed rule, the publication of the interim final rule does allow the agencies to begin formal implementation of the program.
- ☐ **Press Release for Local Use.** The attached press release is available for local adaptation. Please tailor to meet your local needs and coordinate the release with the local FSA office. District Conservationists, Tribal Resource Conservationists, and Tribal Liaisons will ensure broad distribution of this and other program related information.
- ☐ **Application for Long-Term Contracted Assistance (AD-1153).** The form has been revised to accommodate application for the GRP.
- ☐ **Application Evaluation Criteria and Worksheet (Effective Date 7/08/2004).** The criteria used in Fiscal Year 2003 were revised following publication of the rule and in consultation with the Oklahoma State Technical Committee. These criteria reflect the priorities identified in the interim final rule and will be used for the evaluation of all deferred and new applications being considered for funding this year. The evaluation criteria may be revised when the final GRP rules and policy are issued. These criteria will be applied to applications statewide. However, applications will be grouped in to four or more funding pools for the purpose of grouping applications and approving those that provide the greatest benefits to the program.
- ☐ **Conservation Easement Deed [Form CCC-1255-GRP].** This form is to be provided to landowners at the time of application for those requesting the 30-year or permanent easement options of the GRP, as appropriate. The copy provided at application is informational only. It will provide landowners with the details of the easement and requirements that will be placed on the land subject to successful enrollment in the GRP.
- ☐ **Grassland Reserve Program Contract [CCC-920 and Appendix (07-01-03)].** This form will be used to execute rental agreements for the GRP. Provide a copy of this form and appendix to applicants (operators and/or owners) enrolling in the rental agreement option.

- ❑ Rental Rates Table. This table includes the county level rental rates developed by FSA for calculating annual rental payments for GRP rental agreements. Use this table to calculate the total projected cost of the rental agreement. These rates remained unchanged from the 2003 established rates.
- ❑ Estimated Easement Acquisition Costs. This table includes the ESTIMATED cost of acquiring easements by county for permanent and 30-year easements. These are only estimates and are to be used for calculating the estimated easement acquisition costs for the application. Final easement prices will be determined by a certified land appraiser chosen by NRCS for the specific property and may vary considerably from this table. The numbers in this table are for program planning purposes only and do not represent a purchase price for any application. **DO NOT** represent this number to the landowner in any form that would indicate a value specific to their easement.
- ❑ Fact Sheet, Key Points, and Q&A. These information products are available on the web at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/pdf/GRPFct.pdf>
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/pdf/GRPKyPt.pdf>
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/pdf/GRPQnA.pdf>
- ❑ Grassland Reserve Program Application Ranking List. This excel spreadsheet will be used to capture all applications evaluated by county for the program. Complete the worksheet and email to Ted Kuntz at Ted.Kuntz@ok.usda.gov, **no later than close of business August 20, 2004.** The applications will aggregated and assembled into evaluation pools with selection of approved applications completed by August 25, 2004.

Initiate implementation actions on the GRP immediately. Refer any questions to your respective Program Liaison or to the Programs Section.

/s/ Kevin D. Norton, Acting For

M. DARREL DOMINICK
State Conservationist

Enclosures